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An opposing view

When cause is good, secrecy is a virtue

WASHINGTON — The U.S.-Iran-Israel-Nicaragua arms-transfer caper will probably be only a blip on the screen of history unless our fondness for self-flagellation turns it into a serious crisis. The real danger lies not in the misdeeds, but in our overreaction to them.

The three U.S. goals in this affair are decent and responsible: to free innocent hostages, to establish contact with moderate elements in Iran, to help freedom fighters in Nicaragua. Most important is helping patriotic Nicaraguans prevent the USSR from extending its evil empire in Central America.

Under the circumstances, aspects of our aid to the contras had to be provided under the cloak of secrecy. We democratic Americans don't like secrecy; but in dealing with implacable enemies, covert action is often necessary and right. To be justified, U.S. covert action must be enlisted in a good cause, must employ legitimate and proportional means and, if successful, must advance the cause of genuine peace and security. When these standards are met, secrecy is a virtue.

The USA's capacity to keep necessary foreign policy secrets has been seriously impaired during the past decade by ill-conceived restraints placed upon the CIA by Congress and irresponsible disclosures of sensitive information by sectors of the press.

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Until Capitol Hill and the Fourth Estate develop a greater sense of history and show more responsibility, U.S. government agencies will be tempted to circumvent what serious foreign policy students regard as unwise and unnecessary constraints on the authority of the president.

What we need is a new realism about the dangers we face, fresh confidence in our peaceful goals and achievements, and a recognition that we must exercise our influence, sometimes in secret. Where U.S. influence and power have prevailed, there have been peace and freedom, as in Western Europe and Japan. Where we have fled, notably in Vietnam and Cambodia, chaos and brutal tyranny have followed.

We should be less concerned with the alleged arrogance of U.S. power and more concerned about the real paralysis of U.S. power, a paralysis induced by excessive breast-beating. Let's not turn the Iran blip into a Watergate binge.

To supplement the Justice Department investigation and the Tower-Muskie-Scowcroft commission, a select Senate-House committee should be formed. We should all calmly await their findings before rushing to judgment.